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ABSTRACT

Presented at the University of Arizona's Symposium on "Families and Adolescents--Towards a Practical Understanding" in 1978, the paper puts forth a conceptual model of understanding which explains the breakdown of family structure as it pertains to children running away. A brief historical perspective of the phenomenon of running away is given, and the term is defined in such a way as to put some of the onus of responsibility on the parents of the child. Characteristics of runaways/throwaways and their families are reviewed. An exploratory model of the family relationships of such children is presented and includes the following conclusions: the family relationships of the runaway child are characterized by communication weaknesses that are temporary in nature and have a good clinical prognosis with proper intervention; while those of the throwaway child involve a breakdown of the fabric of the family and of family bonds, and are more serious. (DLS)

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LEAVING HOME: FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS OF THE RUNAWAY

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Leaving Home: Family Relationships of the Runaway

> "Two or three days and nights went by; I reckon I might say they swum by, they slid along so quiet and smooth and lovely...It's lovely to live on a raft."
>
> Huck Finn

For the likes of Huckleberry Finn and countless others in America's fictionalized literature, the roads away from home sound the historian's call of, "Go West Young Man." To the adolescent leaving home, running away promises adventure, romanticism, and opportunity. Whether the character is Huck and his (father encouraged) discontentment with civilization or Hemingway's semibiographical portrait of Nick Adams' silent resolution of family incompatibility, the resulting journey is as deeply an American phenomenon as is Benjamin Franklin. The deterioration of these literary dreams into the harsher realities of young people brutalized and victimized by the forces surrounding them is relatively recent. This paper will be putting forth a conceptual model of understanding which explains the breakdown of family structure as it pertains to running away. It will be as much an exercise in American history and literature as it is an investigation in human behavior.

Running Away - A Historical Perspective

There was a time in our past when children leaving home were not perceived as social problems. Benjamin Franklin's youthful escapades in defiance of his family represented in this country's younger days the vitality and opportunity awaiting Americans who seized the moment.

Many explanations have been offered for why between 1870 and 1930 this laissez-faire attitude gradually faded from the American conscience. Whether

the new writings of Freud in Austria or the end of the American frountier were responsible or whether that between 1870 and 1930 youth were increasingly superfluous to the economy had a bearing on our changed behavior is uncertain. What is certain is that during this time young people ever increasingly came under the closer scruntiny of their families. The adolescent - not still child not quite man - was introduced to American society. For the next 20 years American youth gradually saw their former positions of relative freedom and adult status erode away. This period of time saw most states establishing compulsory education laws, and enforcing a new class of "crimes" call status offenses.

A changing country had affected the status of young people, neither had it ignored the structure of the family. The extended family network so common in the first 200 years of this new land was not immune to the growth of an industrial class and the use of technology. The extended family network likewise gradually gave way, as our agrarian based economy declined, and in its place there appeared the nuclear family. As the adolescent had come to depend more upon his family during this period so too did the family find itself dependent less upon their own actions in regards to their financial-emotional security than upon the decisions of the industrial magnets.

Perhaps it was the uncertainity of the new economic order, or the declining birth rates, or the writings of authors like Dickens, Lewis, and Steinbeck that brought forth a new value, a new sense of worth, an investment in our youth. Certainly whatever factors they were they produced a new order and dependency.

Running Away: Complex Behavior Defies Simple Definitions

The National Center for Health Statistics defines running away as, "leaving or staying away on purpose, knowing you would be missed, intending to stay away

from home at least for some time."[1] That definition essentially places the onus of responsibility for running away on the shoulders of the minor undertaking the act. As early as 1973 the inadequacies of this definition were being pointed out by street workers in Washington D. C.:

> The runaway on the street were symptoms of a large problem - the failure of existing social structures to deal with the needs of young people. We knew that many families were inadequate, and we soon found that most agencies were understaffed, lacking in funds, insensitive, or orientated towards detainment and confinement. This multilevel breakdown had defined a certain type of adolescent - the throwaway... These younger people are locked up in detention jails or mental hospitals, ignored in broken homes or abandoned to the streets. With no rights, no options, and no advocates, they are often losers in every way.[2]

Four years later in 1977 the throwaway is defined in a paper (Gullotta, 1977) as:

> Young people who do not willingly choose to leave home but are for whatever reasons placed out of their homes by their parents with the intention that they not return.[3]

1. Plan and Operation of a Health Examination Survey of United States Youth 12-17 Years of Age. Vital and Health Statistics. PHS Publications No. 1000 - Series 11, No. 8. Washington: Gov. Printing Office, 1969.

2. Alternative Pursuits for America's 3rd Century, National Institute on Drug Abuse, DHEW publication No. (ADM) 77-241, Washington: Gov. Printing Office, 1977, p. 163.

3. Gullotta, T., "Runaway: Reality or Myth," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association of Psychiatric Services for Children, Washington, D. C., 1977, p. 3.

Gullotta reported that in his study the throwaway constituted nearly one quarter of the previously defined "runaway" population. Here then is a different view of at least some runaways. It suggests that the onus of responsibility needs to be shifted at least in part away from the minor and borne in part by the other systems in society - notably the family.

Characteristics of Runaways and Their Families

During the depression running away was understood to be a problem of the poor in our society (Armstrong, 1932). The dislocation of individuals during the 30's due to the depression was so extensive that the federal government created the Federal Transient Service to help in the cross country migration of citizens, many of whom were youth. In one study of nearly 3,500 young boys Outland echoed Armstrong's earlier findings (Outland, 1938). The vast majority of youngsters leaving home cited the financial inability of the family to support itself as their reason for leaving. There is no data available today to substantiate that position. Leaving home cuts across all lines of social economic status with some suggestion that repeated runners come most frequently from middle income homes. (Shellow, et. al., 1967).

Determining the pathological severity of running away is an extremely complex and presently unresolved dilemma. There are some clinical studies which suggest that runaways manifest significant psychological disturbances (Leventhal, 1963 and Jones and Labarre,1977). These findings gain support from work that suggests runaway delinquents seem to have the least well organized personality of three studied delinquent groups (Jenkins and Boyer, 1968; Shinohara and Jenkins, 1967). Other work implies that runaways have more police contacts then their non involved peers (Shellow, et al., 1967). Runaways also have a higher incidence of

drug abuse (Steirlin, 1973 and Pittell, 1968).

On the other hand one may observe that, "these behaviors are aftermaths of running away rather than antecedents to it (Justin and Duncan, 1967; Ambrosino, 1971; Pittell, 1968; Robins and O'Neal, 1959,)" Justin and Duncan (1976) continue in emphasing that:

> Runaways are generally exposed to drugs and crime far more as runaways than they were while still at home, and stealing or selling drugs are often the most available means of obtaining money for food and shelter after running away. Furthermore, when a runaway is caught by the police and thus brought into contact with the supposedly corrective influence of the juvenile justice system, the probability that he/she will engage in further delinquent behavior is actually increased rather than decreased. There is also evidence indicating that confinement in a juvenile institution increases the probability of involvement with drug abuse.[4]

Considering these points with the findings of one study that 84% of all runaways are one time occurrences,[5] it must concluded that the definitive answer on the severity of pathology present in the behavior of running away is unanswered.

4. Justice, B. and Duncan, D.; "Running Away: An Epidemic Problem of Adolescence," Vol. XI, No. 43, Fall 1976, P. 366.

5. Gullotta, op. cit.

There exists considerably more agreement on the behalf of researchers on the pressures present in families of runaways. Collectively, their work views the home environment as a frustrating place creating stressful situations for family members (Ambrosino, 1971; Tsubouchi and Jenkins, 1969; Robey, 1964).

Family Relationships of the Runaway-Throwaway: An Exploratory Model

Running away can be seen as a conflict between parent and sibling over a social control issue. The relative importance of the issue raises speculation over the nature of family relationships. Certainly eating dinner with the family, hair length and personal cleanliness, curfew hours, dating, church attendance, and not being home enough are not legitimate causes for leaving home and yet in a surprisingly large number of studies these are the findings reported (Kimloch, 1970; Schmuck, 1971; Kimball, 1970; Gullotta, 1977). They lead to the speculation that the major problem facing the family is not so much the immediate crisis producing issue as it is a lack of trust and security (Kimball, 1970). It appears that disobedience over minor issues displaces the really significant issues allowing for the displacement of intense anger to areas less likely to unsettle an already weak family structure (Troll, 1970).

Two words, trust and security should be emphasized. The runaway and their family have not, initially at least, dissolved a relationship. They have temporarily estranged themselves from one another. Assuredly underlying generational conflicts do exist between the two parties. Nevertheless the difference is of a social nature. The interaction occurring between parent and child produces a situation in which either the child or parent rejects the present condition. This leads the child to reject the environment by leaving home. What is noticeable in families experiencing this situation is 1. the lack of communication

between parent and sibling and 2. the type of communication that occurs between family members. Youngsters perceive parents as not listening (Schmuck, 1971). Parents perceive their children as disobedient, uncaring, and insensitive (Spector, 1967). Neither side is anxious to risk sharing for neither side is secure in their roles or positions. It is not a question of a lack of love but a question of chancing hurt that paralizes the parent and sibling into a behavioral cycle of conflict and struggle. What is hopefully encouraging is the report that programs directed toward changing the communication patterns of parents and runaway youths have shown some relative success.[6]

While the family relationships of the runaway can be viewed in terms of communication weaknesses, temporary in nature, with a good clinical prognosis if proper intervention occurs, the same cannot be said for the throwaway. Parental abandonment in the case of the throwaway can be conceptualized not as a weakness in a relationship but as a breakdown in the fabric of the family. A failure so severe so emotionally tearing that the bonds between parent and sibling are broken. It is important to emphasis that the bonds are broken by the parent to the child, not the child to the parent. The ages of these youngsters are not significantly different from those of runaways, girls slightly outnumber boys by almost a third. The situation may be parents who in their new found self-awareness in divorce decide that neither one wishes to care for their offspring. It may be a child scapegoated and then ostracized from the home by one parent for an incestuous relationship with a parent, brother, or sister. It may be the

6. Gullotta reports that 23% of participants in the NET ran again after their involvement in the program, and none ran more than three times in the four years data was collected. Less clear is the results reported by Zastrow and Navarre (1975). They indicate parent/child satisfaction but do not indicate recitizism rates.

adopted children of childless couples who then had a child. The difference is in the parental feelings towards the sibling.

There is in the parent/child relationship of the throwaway an absence of caring, an emotional neglect in the parent for the sibling. In some situations it is the result of long attempts to stop some parental perceived undesirable behavior of drug abuse or sexually promiscurity in their children. In other situations it constitutes a scapegoating and/or desertion of the child.

The youngsters in nearly all of these situations are pathetic individuals. Their ultimate rejection has been preceded by months, possibly years, of failure relationships not only at home but in school and in the community. Friendless, they are emotionally disorganized grasping for some claim on life. Experiences in assistance and the treatment of this subgroup are not particularly encouraging. When one considers that adolescence is that critical time in development when not only physiological but emotional upheavals occur, the dissolvement of family bonds are extremely damaging. The conflict between the search for a positive ego identity and role confusion is negatively accelerated. While it is, perhaps too soon to tell what ability these individuals will have in living with life, their individual isolation, sadness, and feelings of worthlessness are most certainly not encouraging pronostic indicators for the future.

The purpose of this paper was to place the social problem of leaving home in perspective with the relationships the sibling has to his/her parents. It is important to mention, in this regard, that the findings concerning throwaways reported here are exploratory and descriptive. I have attempted to describe the situations these youth find themselves in and characteristics which seem to generally apply to their families. Finally, if our understanding of runaways is to narrowly

draw along lines of placing responsibility only on the child then this paper suggests that there is a need to redefine our understandings. If in our grouping all of these youngsters together they have been defined as demonstrating characteristics indicative of severe pathology then this paper suggests that a need exists to reexamine our thinking to avoid hasty generalizations.

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